**Lomonosov Moscow State University**

**British home vs. Russian home**

**Final project**

**(“The world of Britain” course)**

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# 1. Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to say that home is extremely important to all people around the world regardless of their nation, religion, wealth and social status. It’s one of these fundamental things we as a humanity have in common – and it’s equally dear to any human being. The word “home” can mean many things. In broader terms it usually means our homeland – a country where we were born and grew up. Scaling down a bit, we get the most common meaning – it is a place where a person lives. However, home is not just the house as a building. It’s so much more for most of us – our family and happy memories, love, care and support. Only when a place fits into this description, it becomes a true home.

Although these are universal values shared by all people around the world, there are also a lot of peculiar things which influence our perception of home. If we asked several people belonging to different cultures what comes to their mind when they hear the word “home”, their answers would be very different. And it should come as no surprise as culture and history always leave their powerful trace. Depending on the society we live in, its values and traditions we view things differently. Our judgments and beliefs are very country specific, but we can never discover it until we start comparing ourselves to another culture. Attitude to home is no exception here. What unites and what separates Russia and Britain when it comes to housing? As it usually happens modern state of things has its deep historical roots.

# 2. Typical Russian home: history and present day situation

# 2.1. Traditional Russian dwelling until the 20th century

Without a doubt, ancestors of modern Russian people used to live in quite different houses primarily depending on their wealth and social status. Grand Princes and the nobility in general used to have large detached houses or sometimes even palaces (at the earlier stage of history they were made mostly of wood but later the dominant material was switched to stone). However, it’s no use talking much about their homes and living conditions. If making a comparison with modern times it would be the same as describing typical Russian home by giving examples and pictures of cottages of the rich. No doubts, it would be a totally wrong direction to follow as it would lead us only to distortion of the reality. As we all know habits, traditions and character of the nation are determined by the majority of the population, and that’s what we should take into account to get the right impression. And it’s a well-known fact that more than 95% of modern Russians can trace their roots to people who were peasants and lived in the countryside. Until Soviet times the level of urbanisation was extremely low in Russia, and most people used to live in villages. The typical dwelling hasn’t changed a lot through all this huge time period, most Russians lived in conditions similar to their fathers and grandparents. A typical house was a one-storey structure called izba. It was built primarily out of wood (stone was extremely expensive and unaffordable for the majority and thus almost never used). Most families lived in detached houses, however semi-detached format (with two families living under one roof but each having a separate entrance) was also quite common.



**Figure 1. Traditional Russian izba**

# 2.2. Soviet period and how it changed typical Russian home

The 20th century and Soviet times made a huge impact on lifestyle and habits of most Russian people with housing being no exception here. Modern Russia is highly urbanized state and flat in a multi-storey building is the most common type of dwelling. How did we come to such state of things? It all began in the earlier Soviet period when huge masses of people rushed into cities where they could get better education and jobs. At the same time there was no proper infrastructure and accommodation for constantly growing population. As a result most people had to live in so called communal apartments which were basically flats divided between several families. The whole family had to live in a tiny room while the kitchen and the bathroom were shared with others. That would be just a nightmare for a British person, but Russians survived (and probably that’s why they feel perfectly fine with modern separate flats which remain to be the most unpopular option for the British).

The problem of communal apartments was partly solved with the beginning of massive house construction era. To deal with a housing shortage the concept of prefabricated buildings was created and successfully implemented throughout the state due to its low cost and small completion time. Such houses which are called khrushchyovkas (after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who was running the government at that time) allowed millions of people to have their own flat. Despite their low quality and poor appearance they achieved their historical goal. Being regarded as uncomfortable today, such houses were a huge leap forward back there significantly improving the lifes of many Russians. In the following years (under Leonid Brezhnev as the head of the country) panel-building industry became more advanced; constructed houses grew taller and their quality improved significantly. The process of unification was moved even further with constructing completely the same buildings throughout the country. As a result millions of Russians lived (and still live) not only in similar conditions but in completely identical flats, the fact that became a subject of countless jokes and funny stories (and even provided the main plot idea for such acclaimed movies like Ryazanov’s “The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!”).



**Figure 2. Examples of typical houses constructed in USSR under Khrushchev (1) and Brezhnev (2)**

# 2.3. Contemporary situation: city and country dwellings

Nowadays there have been even more improvements in housing industry with flats becoming larger and more comfortable. However, they are still nowhere similar to typical British dwellings. Such common terms as “living room” or “dining room” occasionally confuse Russian learners of English. The reason is that despite our rooms have grown bigger we rarely have spare chambers solely for dining or getting together. What we do usually have are only kitchen and bathroom while all the other ones serve as bedrooms for different members of the family and are often referred to as “Parents’ room”, “Grandma’s room” or “Sasha’s room” (or any other name in case of children). One of these bedrooms (usually the largest one with TV) is used as living room. Kitchen almost always functions as dining room as well. In addition to history there’s also another reason why Russian flats are comparatively small. Buying a separate flat still remains unaffordable for most young families despite all the subsidies from the government. Mortgage rates are particularly high leaving millions of people with a hard choice between staying with parents and paying huge portion of their income to a bank for decades to come. That’s why a format of extremely small studio apartments (sometimes as tiny as 20 square meters) was born and remains hugely popular. In such flats kitchen is merged with bedroom into one single room, and that makes them the most affordable offer in the market. Fortunately, nowadays (unlike in Soviet period) it’s possible to make typical flat layouts at least a bit more unique by renovation and furniture.



**Figure 3. Modern Russian multi-storey building**

In addition, in Russia it’s quite common to have two homes with other one being a country house where family usually spends summers and can escape hustle and bustle of the large cities, polluted air, noise and traffic jams. Such houses are called dachas and usually look like a wooden building with a small piece of land. Many former villages (especially those located new large cities) have transformed into such summer-only country settlements. They are associated with quiet and peaceful life and interestingly enough bear a strong connection with country work like gardening, cultivating vegetables etc. By far in a smaller scale but lots of Russians still continue doing what their remote ancestors did.



**Figure 4. Typical wooden house in Russian countryside**

# 3. Housing in Britain: what determines the attitude to home?

Contrary to Russia, the history of housing in Britain enjoyed a lot more gradual development with no sharp moves or turns. The attitude to home hasn’t changed much in case of many British people, primarily because it’s determined by two key features of the national character – love of privacy and traditionalism. Let’s take a closer look at these two points separately to see what kind of impact they make.

# 3.1. Love of privacy

It all begins from the very much valued in Britain sense of privacy. Without a doubt, it influences all spheres of life but gets especially crucial when it comes to housing. For a British person his home is his fortress, and sharing walls with other people (or even worse – hearing the neighbors talking from time to time) is one of these things almost anyone would consider terrible. In addition, British people like to have at least a small piece of garden in front of their house, and separate entrance is a pre-requisite for the majority. Such state of things makes it perfectly simple to rank types of dwelling in the eyes of typical British person. The more private it is, the more desirable (and expensive) it will be. Most desirable house in the UK is a detached cottage with spacious territory. If a family can’t afford it, they would probably be satisfied with a semi-detached house (they will share only one wall with another family) or even a terraced house (they will be surrounded by neighbours from both sides but will at least have a separate entrance and a small piece of land to compensate inconveniences). And of course least wanted option would be to live in flat – a family would stick to it only if they are either extremely poor or have to rent on temporarily basis as a result of some circumstances (like moving to a new area or easier transportation to work).



**Figure 5. British types of houses from least to most desirable: block of flats, terraced houses, semi-detached house, detached house**

# 3.2. Love of traditions

While love of privacy determines where an average British person would prefer to live, value of traditions affects how this place would look like. It’s vital to make an important note here. When it comes to famous British love of traditions it’s not just what most Russians would think of – keeping some old things and enjoying a typical lifestyle. The point is it can be a lot more than that. It was nicely illustrated in a well-known Hollywood comedy “The Holiday”, released in 2006 and starring Cameron Diaz, Kate Winslet, Jude Law and Jack Black. The movie tells us a story of two women (American and British one), who temporarily exchanged homes in order to escape from problems of everyday life. So, according to the plot Amanda Woods from the USA comes to cottage in Surrey and finds out that it bears no resemblance with her modern fully-equipped apartment in Los Angeles. The British cottage was an extremely old building with stonewalls, wooden doors, low ceilings and extremely small bath. There was no central heating, so she had to manage the fireplace herself, but it didn’t get much warmer inside despite all her efforts. Such unwillingness to renovate and make the place more modern and comfortable (or just move if it’s not possible due to construction constrains) would look just crazy in the eyes of Russian people, but a large portion of the British live and enjoy living in very old 15th or 16th century buildings with minimal modern touches. A separate old-style cottage in a rural area with a large garden in front of it – what could be possibly better?



**Figure 6. Interiors of an old British cottage from “The Holiday” movie**

On the contrary, when Russians have an opportunity to make their living conditions more comfortable they usually jump on it without any doubts. To illustrate this we may remember real estate renovation project launched in Moscow not so long ago. Although there are some people who oppose the changes (you can never get every single person agree on something), the majority of flat owners in these houses support the government hoping to get modern and comfortable dwellings in exchange to their old property with inconvenient room layouts and old facilities. Without a doubt, it wouldn’t be so easy to convince the British to leave their much-beloved houses no matter how good alternatives you would offer them. Implementing similar project in Britain is totally unimaginable. Not only due to famous British traditional habits but just because it’s a lot easier to leave a flat than a house. House (especially for the British) is not only the rooms inside, but it’s also a much beloved piece of land and a garden to go along with it. Not even mentioning the importance of location, to which people have the feeling of attachment because of memories connected with it.

# 4. Conclusion: what separates and what unites us?

In Russia attitude to home is completely different from British one. Moreover, by saying word “home” we mean totally different things. The British value privacy and traditions above all, and for them the more detached and separate the house is the better. But as far as Russia is concerned, most people actually do live in flats which are the least desirable option among the British. And we feel nothing wrong about it despite the fact we can sometimes hear our neighbours talking and have to share the same entrance with others. The reason is probably just the habit, Russians just got used to living in flats during the massive urbanisation of Soviet times. Moreover, separate flat was always regarded as a very comfortable place to live as lots of people around the country had nothing but a small room with shared kitchen. Pre-Soviet traditions of wooden house-building despite completely disappearing from cities still survive in form of summer countryside houses (dachas) which have a very special place in heart of many Russians. Probably, that’s where we realise British dream of having a piece of land and a separate entrance!

However, despite all these historical and cultural differences there is one thing that is definitely true for British and Russian people alike. And it’s perfectly summarized in a well-known saying “There is no place like home”. No matter where one’s home is located, what it is build of and what size it is, it’s always a very special place for any person, our true fortress, where we are loved, supported and valued. And our families, people we live with are far more important than beautiful interiors, spacious rooms or luxurious furniture – just because they are the ones who transform a dwelling into a place we can call home.

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